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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Sub-Commission on Prevention
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DISCRIMINATION AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Written statement submitted by The Nordic Saami Council,
Inuit Circumpolar Conference, International Work Group
for Indigenous Affairs and Anti-Slavery International,
non-governmental organizations in consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following communication which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[28 June 1991]

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, BANGLADESH

1. In its decision 1989/109 the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities expressed its thanks to the Government of Bangladesh for the progress made in respect of the treatment of its tribal population. Unfortunately, information given to the International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission during its recent visit to Bangladesh and India clearly shows that this conclusion was premature. The findings of the International Commission have already been summarized in document E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1991/5.

2. During the visit of the Commission multi-party democracy was restored in Bangladesh. This gave rise to hopes for a substantial improvement in the human rights situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. However, the Chittagong Hill Tracts are still under tight military control and gross violations of human rights are prevalent throughout the area. Furthermore, since the fall of the Ershad regime all District Councils in Bangladesh have been suspended, except for the three District Councils of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. These were established in 1989 under procedures implemented by force and intimidation which were heavily criticized by the Commission.
3. Since 1979 over 400,000 Bengali settlers have been moved from the plains to the Hill Tracts, taking over land belonging to the hill people. Property rights of the hill people, recognized by Bangladeshi law, have been contravened as settlers have illegally occupied land belonging to the indigenous people.
4. The militarization of the Hill Tracts is not confined only to the tribal people. The largely involuntary relocation of hill people into cluster villages has been paralleled by a similar process of confining Bengali settlers into military-controlled guchchagrams. Large numbers of settlers expressed to the Commission their desire to return to the plains.
5. At the issuing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission Report at the House of Lords, London, on 23 May 1991, Co-Chairman Wilfried Telkämper, Vice-President of the European Parliament, stated that an enormous percentage of Bangladesh's national income is spent on military oppression in the Hill Tracts. In spite of being one of the world's poorest countries, Bangladesh appears to make the intense militarization of the Hill Tracts a priority, adding further to its already overwhelming problems.
6. The Commission recommends that the great step to multi-party democracy which took place in December 1990 be extended to cover the whole country, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts. All further settlement by outsiders in the Hill Tracts should be stopped. Vast numbers of Bengali settlers in the Hill Tracts want to leave, but lack the means to do so. Voluntary relocation should be discussed in the context of foreign aid support. Cluster villages should be dismantled and an independent investigation of title to land and illegal occupants should take place. Demilitarization of the Chittagong Hill Tracts must be a priority and autonomous political institutions established following a referendum for the hill peoples. The District Council laws should be repealed or amended.
7. The signatories of this statement are gravely concerned about the many violations of human rights that have taken place in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as documented by the International Commission. Most of these violations occurred before the new Government came to power. However, there have been reports of recent atrocities against the hill tribes. Furthermore, the effect of the recent cyclone on the Chittagong Hill Tracts has been largely neglected, and there have been reports that no emergency aid has been sent to the people of the region.

8. We are confident that the new Government of Bangladesh is able and willing to change radically its policy towards the Chittagong hill tribes and to improve the human rights situation in the region.

9. We strongly urge that the United Nations appoint a Special Rapporteur or provide a person under its advisory services to work with the Government of Bangladesh, the ILO and competent NGOs to assist and monitor the changes in policy recommended by the International Commission.
